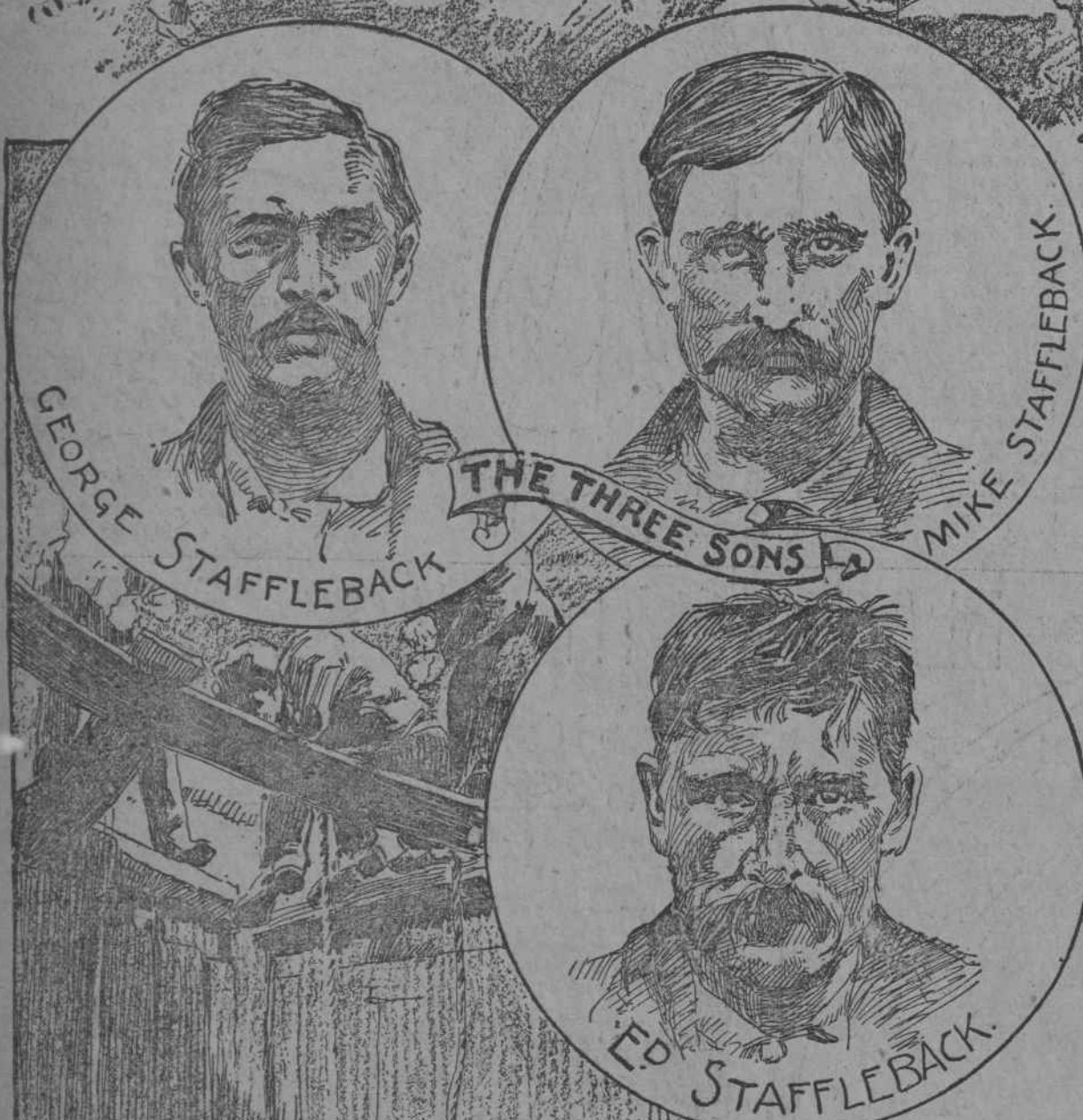


TWENTY MURDERS BY A



Murder, by Wholesale, the Business of the Staffleback Family, Who Lured Victims Into Their Den to Kill and Rob Them.

By a Staff Correspondent.

JOPLIN, Mo., Sept. 24.—Deep, dismal pits, weed-grown at the top, and half filled with stagnant water—pits over which the vultures wheel, as over a charnel house, and where silence broods as a spirit.

Such are the sepulchres where the Stafflebacks have buried their dead and which the citizens of Galena, Kan., are pumping dry.

In these pits, whelmed under the green waters, are dead men and dead women. Day by day the small donkey engines puff away at their weary task, the pump clank and the derricks hoist their loads of black mud and ooze from the depths.

With every load that is hoisted from the bottom there is a creaking of necks by the curious throng, and a general inspection of the awful cargo.

Sometimes the derrick brings up an old garment worn by one of the victims of this family of fiends. Sometimes it is a suspender buckle, a few buttons, or a woman's shift waist.

Then there are deep and bitter curses, and threats of vengeance against the gray old woman and her brood, who crouch in the Columbus jail like wolves in a cage.

Twenty murders are laid at the door of the Staffleback family, and if the yawning pit mouths could speak they could tell stories of old crimes that are not as yet even suspected.

The Stafflebacks are the only persons who have ever approached in the number and the brutality of their murders the record of the Benders.

With both families murder was apparently a trade, and in the general character of their hideous crimes the two families are tied for first honors.

In 1873 the Benders occupied a single-story frame house on the prairie road leading from Independence to Osage Mission, Kan.

The family consisted of the father, mother, son and daughter. The house was so situated that many travellers stopped there for lodging. There were no near neighbors.

The dining room and kitchen were divided by a curtain composed of sheets sewed together. Travellers marked for murder were placed at the supper table with their backs to this sheet partition.

Swinging an axe from behind this sheet at the shadow of the traveller's head was easy. The murdered men were then tumbled through a trap door into a cellar under the floor, where they were robbed and afterward buried in the garden at the rear of the house.

On one occasion Kate Bender murdered a traveller in his bed, and then lay down and slept beside the corpse until morning.

Dr. York, of Independence, was the last victim of the Benders. He disappeared in the early part of April, 1873. Search was made by his brother. He was traced to the Benders' house. They acknowledged that Dr. York had been there, but said he had not stopped over night.

Mr. York went into the garden and found a sunken spot that looked like a grave. It was dug into, and the body of Dr. York was found. In other portions of the garden seven more bodies were found.

The Benders packed up their household goods and fled toward the Indian Territory. They were followed by a hastily organized party. The party returned the next day, saying that they had not been able to find the Benders.

They have never been heard from since then, and the general inference is that they were lynched by the party that followed them.

To return to the Staffleback family—“Pickers Point” is the name of the outlying part of Galena, where the Stafflebacks held forth. All about the “Point” are the gray dumps and shafts of old abandoned mines, and set squarely in the midst of these is the long single story hybrid structure, half log and half frame building, where the Stafflebacks lived, plundered and murdered.

The father, Michael Staffleback, although bearing a bad reputation, has been separated from “Mother Nance” and her brood for some years, and is not implicated in the later murders of the family.

As a schoolgirl in Jamestown, Wis., Nancy Chase was a pretty and black-eyed, and quick tempered, as became one with a strain of Wyandotte blood in her veins. She was raised in the faith of the Baptist

Church, and even now in her old age, and with the ghosts of many murdered men about her, she clings to the belief of her church.

Nancy Chase, the black-eyed, became the wife of Michael Staffleback in 1851, and for a number of years they lived in St. Louis, where a number of children were born.

In 1862 they moved to Wisconsin, the old home of Nancy, where they lived for nine years. So far the inherent viciousness of the family had not cropped out, beyond a few instances of petty thievery.

In 1871 the family again moved to Missouri, where they settled on a miserable little forty acre farm. It was here that the first signs of degeneracy and serious wickedness came to the surface.

By this time all of Nancy Chase's good looks had vanished. She was withered and faded and a great deal of gray was mingled with her black, snaky locks.

Here commenced, also, the bickering that finally led to the separation of the father and mother. From time to time one of the older boys would be arrested for hog stealing or robbing a smokehouse, and finally one of them was sent to the penitentiary.

In the discussions between the father and mother the children invariably sided with the latter, who seems to have been the dominant spirit in the family through all their troubles.

For some time after Michael Staffleback deserted his wife the family continued to live together on the little farm, shunned by their neighbors and practically ostracized. Mother Staffleback finally sued for a divorce, which was granted by default. From this point Michael Staffleback drops into obscurity.

After securing her divorce, all the innate devilry in the nature of “Mother Nance” came to the surface. She moved with her family to Joplin, where she took a small shanty on Swindle Hill. It was part boards and part canvas.

Here the Stafflebacks spent several years and here “Mother Nance's” covey of degenerates had full sway. By their murderous instincts they made themselves respected even among their desperate associates.

To the police of Joplin the sons became known as thieves, and the daughters as the very worst of Joplin's lower class of women.

“Mother Nance,” during this period of her career, managed to infatuate an old man known as Dad Rodabaugh. He was a silly old man, white-haired and senile, and a pensioner of the Government.

One night old “Dad” Rodabaugh came to the Staffleback shanty and asked for Mother Nance. He had just drawn his pension of \$35 and had been drinking to some extent.

Mike Staffleback, one of the sons, was there. For a while old Rodabaugh sat and doddled by the fire. Cora Staffleback, the wife of George, another son, sat in one corner.

Suddenly Mike Staffleback called Mother Nance to one side and said:

“Mammy, I need some money and have got to make a raise” at the same time Mike nodded in the direction of old man Rodabaugh. Mother Nance smiled and said: “I understand. Wait till he starts home.”

“Billy,” said Mike, “I know where we can make a raise if you ain't afraid.”

“Afraid!” replied Billy, “I guess not.”

“Then don't peach if we are arrested,” said Mike.

“Peach! I never did, did I?” returned Billy.

About 11 o'clock old man Rodabaugh got up to go. As he was leaving, Mother Nance followed him to the door and said:

“Be sure and don't lose your money, dad.”

Just at daybreak Mike and Ed Staffleback and Billy Martin came back to the shanty together. They sat down by the old cracked stove and poured out some money and counted it. The sum was \$31.50, something less than the amount of old Rodabaugh's pension.

When they had finished Mike called to the old woman, who was asleep in the adjoining room.

“Mammy, get up and get my breakfast. I'm tired, and want to go to sleep.”

“How did you come out, son?”

“All right, mammy; but I got my shirt bloody, and had to steal another.”

“What did you do with it?”

“Burnt it, of course. I am too fly to leave anything like that around.”

Then the old she wolf called Martin and again warned him not to tell. “I know where you boys can get some more money to-morrow night,” she said. “By the way, I wonder where I can find ‘Dad’ Rodabaugh,” and she leered at her progeny knowingly.

“I don't know mammy, unless you look down a shaft,” replied Mike.

They had shafts in Joplin as well as in Galena, and the Stafflebacks had even then acquired the “shaft habit” of disposing of dead men.

Soon afterward there were other disappearances of boozy and belated citizens on “Swindle Hill.” There were also robberies and assaults and many other crimes of which the Stafflebacks were suspected.

At length the police made a carefully planned raid on the “Swindle Hill” shanty and captured a large amount of stolen property. This ended the career of the Stafflebacks in Joplin.

Two of the boys were convicted and sent to the penitentiary for short terms. The old woman was given to understand that the police thereafter would make Joplin too hot to hold her. Consequently Joplin woke up one morning and found the Stafflebacks gone, and the “Swindle Hill” shanty empty.

Galena is only a short distance from Joplin. It is a mining town, rough and poor and gray. Its only pleasures are on pay day. Then the miners drink and carouse and spend their money and go to work again with aching heads and repentant spirits.

One day about three years ago signs of life were noticed about an old abandoned and tumble down shanty near the southern extremity of Pickers Point.

Smoke curled lazily from the crumbling chimney, and a withered old woman flitted crone-like about the yard. Other women, bleary-eyed and dissipated, could be seen passing and repassing the broken window.

In the language of the Point somebody had “moved in.” If Pickers Point had known then what it knows now somebody would have moved out again quite as suddenly as he came in.

The new arrivals were the Stafflebacks. The cabin that they had taken possession of stands on an eminence exposed to winter winds and summer sun. It is in the midst of vast gray heaps of stone and slack. Within a few yards of the door are a dozen abandoned shafts where at one time or another miners had delved vainly for lead or zinc.

Some of the shafts were seventy feet deep. Others were 200. Every one of them contained more or less slime covered and stagnant water. As for the shanty itself, it was all but uninhabitable. Its roof was rent and broken, and patched crudely, and its only door was so low that visitors were forced to stoop in order to enter.

A hole, dignified with the name of window, afforded an ingress for a few straggling rays of light. For years even the miserable dwellers on the Point had scorned to live in the shanty.

In a few days “Staffleback House” was in full blast. Drunken men came and went. There were sounds of blows and broils, and shrill, harpy screams.

See Mother Nance and her brood at their evening meal. On the bare board stands a dingy kerosene lamp, odorless and smoking. The old woman, withered and beaked like a vulture, sits at the head of the table. In the centre stand a dish of fat bacon, some heavy biscuit and a pot of black coffee.

On one side are Ed Staffleback, dull-witted and brutal, and framed only for the execution of another's plans, Mike Staffleback, the schemer and plotter of crime, and George Staffleback, the younger son, and probably the least offensive of the lot. There are Louisa and Emma, the two daughters.

There are Cora Staffleback, George's wife; Anna McComb, and Rosa Bayne, low and slatternly women, with never a thought above the platter of bacon before them. They eat like hogs, in rooting, ghoulish silence.

So far the open graves of the abandoned pits contain no human prey. The Stafflebacks are spending their time in getting acquainted with the lay of the land.

Scenes
of the
Search
for Victims
Among
the Old
Mine
Shafts and
Portraits
of Mother
Staffle-
back's
Murderous
Brood, from
Photographs
Taken for
the Sunday
Journal.

